

Solving Security Problems Through Education

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An inmate education program at one of the Los Angeles County Jails is demonstrating the success of non-traditional solutions to the problem of how to provide services with scarce resources. The program, "English as a Second Language" (ESL), is available to 300 medium-security inmates in the south facility of the North/South Facility at Peter J. Pitchess Honor Rancho in Saugus, California.

Classes are provided under the auspices of the Hacienda-La Puente Unified School District, which makes available two instructors and all necessary instructional materials. The only direct cost to the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department is the teachers' salaries. Traditional costs for classroom space and security were avoided by using the inmates' housing barracks as classrooms.

In addition to teaching inmates basic English and life skills, the program has had a positive impact on inmate behavior and has led to increased cooperation between inmates and staff.

Background

The south facility is a medium-security open yard and barracks facility that houses 1,900 sentenced and unse-

activities such as G.E.D. testing, counseling, and basic education classes. Other areas, such as the inmate dining room, church, and

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seven "mini-compounds" of primarily three barracks each.

During the summer of 1990, the ethnic background of the inmate population began to shift with the proportion of Hispanic inmates increasing rapidly. Two surveys determined that 1,300 out of the 1,900 inmates-about 70 percent-were Hispanic. In addition, the survey results indicated that approximately 800 of these Hispanics were foreign born.

Our challenge was twofold: We needed to help our staff communicate with our many non-English-speaking inmates and at the same time provide basic education to these inmates, who were mostly illiterate.

There appeared to be no available classroom space. One of the facility's housing barracks had already been converted to a classroom, but it was scheduled to capacity with ongoing educational

recreational areas, were also being used for education. In addition, even if space were available, having 100 inmates together at one location would require additional security staff.

Non-Traditional Solutions

To resolve these problems of space and staffing, we decided to teach the inmates in their housing barracks. Because the number of potential students was so large, a mini-compound of three barracks became the classroom site. Using the barracks offered two advantages:

1) we would not have to move a large number of inmates; and 2) the security staff was already in place.

Nevertheless, the school staff has had to use a great deal of ingenuity to overcome difficulties associated with teaching a large number of students in a makeshift classroom. For example, discarded plastic barrels are being used as seats. Bunks are moved aside and instruc-

tional materials, including televisions and VCRs, are carted into the barrack's classroom.

The concept of only two teachers being responsible for teaching 300 inmates to speak English is almost overwhelming. However, their "immersion" approach to instruction is quite effective, as anyone who has lived in a foreign country can attest.

The teachers spend about two hours per day, five days a week in each barrack. Their lessons consist of speak-and-repeat sessions covering basic daily situations that inmates encounter during their incarceration. After each lesson, the large group of inmates is divided into smaller groups for audio and video teaching, as well as more personalized instruction.

The teaching does not end when the teachers leave the barrack for the day. In an effort to enhance the teaching environment, barrack trustees are chosen from the bilingual inmate population. They serve as teachers' aides, answering questions

district administrators and the tremendous enthusiasm of the program staff.

Results

Despite a transient population that changes constantly because of new commitments, reclassification, and releases, the facility has seen many benefits from this program.

The most direct benefit—and one that was apparent early—was the improved behavior of inmates in the ESL mini-compound. Recognizing the valuable education they were receiving in this experimental program, the inmates immediately exhibited controlled behavior both individually and as a group. Since the program's inception, there has been a noticeable absence of inmate discipline reports in the ESL compound.

The inmates certainly demonstrate eagerness to participate during class activities. In fact, according to one of the teachers, "This is the best teaching experience I've had since I started working here."

rivalries to maintain the viability of this program.

From the department's perspective, the ESL program is meeting a number of institutional goals:

- We are offering quality and relevant education to our Hispanic inmate population.
- We are occupying the time and energy of 300 inmates, while encouraging their positive behavior.
- Best of all, we achieved these goals without a great deal of expense or sacrifice of space or other resources.

The ESL program demonstrates a perfect marriage of educational and security goals.

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and assisting inmates in practicing pronunciations on their homework assignments.

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We have also noticed a reduction in gang activity.

While we must monitor inmates' gang affiliations constantly so that no gang becomes dominant, many gang members and those from different cultures have set aside traditional